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‘A Bloody Racist’: About Achebe’s View of Conrad

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In the lecture entitled ‘An Image of Africa’ (*Massachusetts Review* (Winter, 1977), 782–94), the distinguished novelist Chinua Achebe declared: ‘Conrad was a bloody racist’. *Heart of Darkness*, he claimed, is ‘an offensive and totally deplorable book’ in which Conrad has adopted ‘the role of purveyor of comforting myths’. The lecture was variously cool, mocking, sarcastic, and angry; and disconcerting enough. Like many other readers, I have long regarded *Heart of Darkness* as one of the greatest works of fiction, and have felt that part of its greatness lies in the power of its criticisms of racial prejudice. Particularly disconcerting, then, was this attack, coming from an important and influential black novelist whose work *Things Fall Apart* can be regarded as ‘a *Heart of Darkness* from the other side’. In this essay I attempt to defend Conrad’s tale from some of his strictures and discuss the criteria involved.

Achebe is black and I am white; he argues that whites have long overpraised *Heart of Darkness* precisely because it reflects their racial prejudice, whereas he sees clearly: he resembles the boy who declares that the Emperor has no clothes. There seems to be an insinuation, as Achebe proceeds, that whites are disqualified on racial grounds from judging the text. However, I have taken heart from my acquaintance Lewis Nkosi, the black playwright and critic, who has worked on Conrad with me at Sussex. When I asked him whether he agreed with Achebe that Conrad was a racist, he smiled and promptly quoted one of Marlow’s most telling observations: “‘The conquest of the earth, which mostly means the taking it away from those who have a different complexion or slightly flatter noses than ourselves, is not a pretty thing when you look into it too much.’” (From the wall of my room, various pictured culture-heroes looked down on us: Shakespeare with a ring in his left ear, rufous D. H. Lawrence, Rochester holding the laurels over the head of his monkey, and Dizzy Gillespie with his uniquely erect trumpet-barrel.)

Achebe’s main claims are these. Conrad, in the ‘offensive and totally deplorable’ *Heart of Darkness*, has won the acclaim of white readers by pandering to their prejudices: Conrad dramatizes Africa as ‘a place of negations . . . in comparison with which Europe’s own state of spiritual grace will be manifest’. The blacks are dehumanized and degraded, seen as grotesques or as a howling mob. They are denied speech, or are granted

speech only to condemn themselves out of their own mouths. Furthermore, Marlow (who is Conrad's mouthpiece) is guilty of liberalism, which entails a paternalist form of racialism. As the tale unfolds, the author displays 'a preposterous and perverse kind of arrogance in . . . reducing Africa to the role of props for the breakup of one petty European mind'. However talented Conrad may be, his tale preaches racial intolerance; it is on the side of enslavement rather than deliverance; and it is therefore to be condemned.

Achebe's paper was originally presented as a lecture at the University of Massachusetts, and one can imagine that he (like some of his fictional protagonists) relished the prospect of stirring things up, perhaps shocking his hosts and taking a cultural revenge. No doubt the paper had the value of arousing vigorous debate. But there remains a saddening perversity about it. One is reminded of Conrad's observation: 'Fraternity means nothing unless the Cain-Abel business.'¹ The blacks have enough enemies; it is saddening to see Achebe attack one of their friends. In *Things Fall Apart* Achebe showed himself capable of fine discriminations; it is a pity that that capacity appears to have been eroded by bitterness. Above all, the historical sense which was so keen in his novels appears to have been forgotten in this lecture. If Achebe had but recalled that *Heart of Darkness* appeared in 1899, when Victoria was on the throne, when imperialistic fervour was extreme and the Boer War was soon to begin, he might have been more prepared to recognize various unconventional qualities of Conrad's tale.

Achebe makes a few concessions, but these tend to be withdrawn as the attack gathers momentum, resulting in apparent self-contradiction. Thus, early in the argument, we are assured that Conrad 'is undoubtedly one of the great stylists of modern fiction and a good storyteller into the bargain'; yet later we are told that 'Conrad's famed evocation of the African atmosphere . . . amounts to no more than a steady, ponderous, fake-ritualistic repetition of two sentences, one about silence and the other about frenzy' (the repetition is not illustrated), while the story concerns merely that 'breakup of one petty European mind' (Achebe ignores Kurtz's representative significance). In fact Achebe pummels the text so heavily as to obliterate any distinction between Conrad and Kipling, or for that matter between Conrad and any third-rate jingoistic writer. However, his denunciations do have the ironic effect of drawing attention to the very strengths that he seems unable to perceive; and they suggest that a critic should not be deterred by its apparent obviousness from reiterating what is important in a work.

Far from being a 'purveyor of comforting myths', Conrad most deliberately and incisively debunks such myths. The myth of inevitable progress, for example; the myth that white civilization is necessarily morally superior to 'savagery'; the myth that imperialism is the altruistic matter of 'weaning those ignorant millions from their horrid ways': all these are mocked by the

¹ *Joseph Conrad's Letters to R. B. Cunninghame Graham*, edited by Cedric Watts (London, 1969), p. 117.

tale. It is an organizational principle of *Heart of Darkness* that reassuring clichés are evoked and then subverted, just as salutary affirmations are sought, briefly established, and then undermined. The very opening of the tale makes this clear when the primary narrator offers resonant and apparently authoritative tribute to the Thames and her adventurers, but only for his words to be dramatically undercut by the entry of Marlow with his 'And this also . . . has been one of the dark places of the earth' — which completes perhaps the most brilliant 'false start' in literature. The fourth paragraph's tacit reference to 'Youth' ('Between us there was, as I have already said somewhere, the bond of the sea') has helped to create the impression that the anonymous narrator speaks with authorial force, so when Marlow enters it is as though, in life, an author had been interrupted by a character whose experience and intelligence exceed the author's.

Achebe asserts that the tale celebrates the 'dehumanization' of the blacks; yet it is precisely against such dehumanization that the tale amply protests. Of all the people described, by far the happiest, healthiest, and most vital are the group of blacks seen paddling their canoe through the surf of the coast: 'They shouted, sang; their bodies streamed with perspiration; they had faces like grotesque masks — these chaps; but they had bone, muscle, a wild vitality, an intense energy of movement, that was as natural and true as the surf along their coast. They wanted no excuse for being there.'² It is a *locus classicus*; a dramatized ontological argument; a point of reference against which we may judge the depredations of the white man, when we see by contrast the mortal lassitude of the natives in the grove of death, the hopeless weariness of the blacks in the chain gang, and the absurd hybrids who are the 'reclaimed'. Furthermore, against this instance of natural vitality we may measure the state of the 'hollow men', the European pilgrims; against such 'muscle and bone' we may measure the 'flabby devil' of colonialist rapacity. Indeed, Conrad's implications are remarkably close to the points made here by Achebe in 1966:

Without subscribing to the view that Africa gained nothing at all in her long encounter with Europe, one could still say, in all fairness, that she suffered many terrible and lasting misfortunes. In terms of human dignity and human relations the encounter was almost a complete disaster for the black races. It has warped the mental attitudes of both black and white.³

— 'Of both black and white': exactly the point made in numerous graphic ways by Conrad in his tale of 1899; by, for example, the depiction of the 'reclaimed' black in charge of the chain gang, who 'seemed to take [Marlow] into partnership in his exalted trust', or by the depiction of the decline of

² *Heart of Darkness*, edited by Robert Kimbrough, second edition (New York, 1971), p. 14. If 'dehumanization' is a sign of racial prejudice, then the author of *Heart of Darkness* frequently exhibits a prejudice against whites.

³ 'The Black Writer's Burden', *Présence Africaine*, 31 (1966), p. 135, quoted in *Critical Perspectives on Chinua Achebe*, edited by C. L. Innes and Bernth Lindfors (London, 1979), p. 39.

Kurtz from one with exalted ideals to one who scrawls 'Exterminate all the brutes!' at the foot of his report. We may recall Conrad's encouraging letters to Roger Casement, his old acquaintance who was preparing for Parliament a damning report on King Leopold's operations in the Congo (the travellers had met at Matadi in 1890). On 21 December 1903, Conrad wrote to Casement:

And the fact remains that in 1903, seventy five years after the abolition of the slave trade (because it was cruel) there exists in Africa a Congo State, created by the act of European powers where ruthless, systematic cruelty towards the blacks is the basis of administration, and bad faith towards all the other states the basis of commercial policy.

I do hope we shall meet before you leave. Once more my best wishes go with you on your crusade. Of course you make any use you like of what I write to you.⁴

Nevertheless, Achebe suggests no distinction between Leopold and Conrad: both are bloody racists. Black is to white, he claims, as Dorian Gray's portrait is to Gray himself: the picture bears the ugliness which is really the man's. He cites Marlow's glimpse of the natives on the bank:

They howled and leaped, and spun, and made horrid faces; but what thrilled you was just the thought of your remote kinship with this wild and passionate uproar. Ugly. Yes, it was ugly enough; but if you were man enough you would admit to yourself that there was in you just the faintest trace of a response to the terrible frankness of that noise, a dim suspicion of there being a meaning in it which you — you so remote from the night of first ages — could comprehend. (pp. 36–37)

To the reader who is familiar with *Things Fall Apart*, and who therefore is familiar with the historical and sacramental import of such howling and leaping, Marlow's attitude may well seem myopic and patronizing: Marlow assumes that what he sees is ancient, primitive, chaotic, mindless; something that civilized man hopes to have outgrown, and may be troubled to think he has not outgrown. Marlow, however, cannot be blamed for lacking the benefit of *Things Fall Apart*, which appeared nearly sixty years after he told his tale; and Conrad is offering an entirely plausible rendering of the responses of a British traveller of c.1890 to the strange and bewildering experiences offered by the Congo. The passage is patently justified on realistic grounds. And if it be argued that the author then condones the myopic and patronizing, the answer is 'Certainly not, if the passage is taken in context': for it is a context in which Marlow increasingly calls in question the basis of a patronizing outlook, whether of others or himself, by reference to the brutalities of the whites ('Transgression — punishment — bang! Pitiless, pitiless. That's the only way') and their absurdities ('I noticed there was a hole in the bottom of his pail'); and the myopic is increasingly cured by the tale's tendency to show what most whites at that period were unable to

⁴ Zdzisław Najder, 'Conrad's Casement Letters', in *Polish Perspectives* (Warsaw), 17 (December 1974), 25–30 (p. 30).

see. The narrative obliges the reader to ask whether civilization is a valuable, fragile improvement on savagery, or a hypocritical elaboration of it. Part of the time the tale suggests the familiar notion, that Africa offers the primitive basis from which European culture has fortunately evolved; but against this plays the notion that Africa offers the raw and vigorous truth which has been adulterated and concealed by European culture; and sometimes the tale offers a third possibility, the suggestion of cultural equivalence between the two regions.

However, the description of 'the savage who was fireman', the 'improved specimen' who 'could fire up a vertical boiler', leads Achebe to remark that since Conrad was 'a romantic on the side' the passage is meant to prove that savages should stay in their place. To which one rejoinder is that the passage implies, rather, that the whites should stay in their place, which is certainly not Africa: for had the Europeans not imposed themselves on the Congo, this 'really fine chap' would not have become 'a thrall to strange witchcraft'. We may recall that Conrad, who spoke of the Boer War as 'idiotic', later referred to the colonial powers in Africa as 'competitors for the privilege of improving the nigger (as a buying machine)'.⁵

Conrad's prejudice, Achebe continues, is illustrated by the contrast of the black mistress with the white Intended: the latter speaks but the former does not, so 'it is clearly not part of Conrad's purpose to confer language on the "rudimentary souls" of Africa'.⁶ The criticism seems maladroit. The black woman is certainly capable of speech ('She got in one day and kicked up a row. . . . She talked like a fury to Kurtz for an hour' (p. 62)); and no explanation is needed for Marlow's ability to converse directly with a fellow-European but not with a black woman who, moreover, is seen by him only from a distance. Again, the criticism draws attention to the admirably paradoxical procedures of the tale. Marlow's narrative does indeed establish a strong symbolic contrast between the black woman, seen as a potent emanation of the seductive darkness of the jungle, and the Intended, seen as a statuesque representative of noble idealism. But the contrast, though strongly established, is deliberately eroded. Marlow says of the Intended: 'She put out her arms as if after a retreating figure . . . I shall see her . . . , a tragic and familiar Shade, resembling in this gesture another one, tragic also, and bedecked with powerless charms, stretching bare brown arms over the glitter of the infernal stream, the stream of darkness' (p. 78). The similarity in gesture (both women stretch out their arms as though to recall Kurtz) serves to question any sense of the superiority of the white woman to the black. Both are loyal to the same man; both have charms (whether magical or metaphorical, metallic or bodily) which have proved impotent:

⁵ *Joseph Conrad's Letters to R. B. Cunninghame Graham*, p. 126; 'Autocracy and War', in *Notes on Life and Letters* (London, 1921), p. 143. Stein in *Lord Jim* complains that 'man will never on his heap of mud keep still'.

⁶ 'An Image of Africa', p. 786.

both suffer loss and are described as 'tragic'. Conrad's art prevents us from seeing the contrasts without also seeing the similarities.⁷

Achebe complains that when Conrad grants speech to the blacks, it is only in order that they be condemned out of their own mouths, as when the crew of the steamboat say 'Catch 'im . . . Eat 'im!', thus proclaiming themselves cannibals. According to Norman Sherry's researches, the crews of the vessels which plied the Congo were mostly from Bangala, and 'the Bangalas', Sherry observes, 'were joyfully cannibalistic'.⁸ More important in the story is the irony: the cannibal crew actually refrain from eating human flesh on the journey (so that Marlow is puzzled by their great 'restraint'), whereas it is strongly hinted that the European, Kurtz, participates in rites in which he eats human flesh — and 'he lacked restraint in the gratification of his various lusts'. If, indeed, the black crew condemn themselves out of their own mouths, so also, and repeatedly, do the whites, from the aunt with her naïve belief in 'weaning those ignorant millions from their horrid ways' to the callous manager with his talk of 'unsound method' and to Kurtz with his 'The horror! The horror!'.

The most saddening part of Achebe's attack comes when, while conceding that the tale contains 'advanced and humane views', he proceeds to treat those views as though they are, after all, retrograde and inhumane: he talks rather sneeringly of 'liberalism' and defines it in such a way as to imply that it entails or supports racial intolerance.

Marlow comes through to us not only as a witness of truth, but one holding those advanced and humane views appropriate to the English liberal tradition which required all Englishmen of decency to be deeply shocked by atrocities in Bulgaria or the Congo of King Leopold of the Belgians or whatever. Thus Marlow is able to toss out such bleeding-heart sentiments as these: 'They were all [*sic*] dying slowly — it was very clear. They were not enemies, they were not criminals, they were nothing earthly now — nothing but black shadows of disease and starvation, lying confusedly in the greenish gloom. Brought from all the recesses of the coast in all the legality of time contracts, lost in uncongenial surroundings, fed on unfamiliar food, they sickened, became inefficient, and were then allowed to crawl away and rest.' The kind of liberalism espoused here by Marlow/Conrad touched all the best minds of the age in England, Europe, and America. It took different forms in the minds of different people but almost always managed to sidestep the ultimate question of equality between white people and black people. That extraordinary missionary, Albert Schweitzer, who sacrificed brilliant careers in music and theology in Europe for a life of service to Africans in much the same area as Conrad writes about, epitomizes the ambivalence. . . . Schweitzer says: 'The African is indeed my brother but my junior brother.' And so he proceeded to build a hospital appropriate to the

⁷ The linkage may remind us that the crucial moment in Conrad's first novel, *Almayer's Folly*, when a 'happy ending' briefly seems a possibility, comes when Almayer is tempted to abandon his jealousy and his racial prejudice and to join Nina in her flight with her Balinese lover: 'What if he should suddenly take her to his heart, forget his shame, and pain, and anger, and — follow her! What if he changed his heart if not his skin and made her life easier between the two loves . . . !' (London, 1947, p. 192). As much as anything, it is racial prejudice that destroys Almayer.

⁸ *Conrad's Western World* (London, 1971), p. 59.

needs of junior brothers with standard of hygiene reminiscent of medical practice in the days before the germ theory of disease came into being. (pp. 787–88)⁹

Achebe appears somewhat hard to please. When the tale offers views which he regards as illiberal, he condemns them; and when the tale is humane and liberal, he redefines such liberalism as racist illiberalism. That spleen has clouded his judgement is suggested by the phrasing at 'Thus Marlow is able to toss out such bleeding-heart sentiments as these', for the phrases 'toss out' and 'bleeding-heart sentiments' (implying the casual, facile, and sentimental) seem utterly inappropriate to the measured, specific, and shrewdly ironic passage that he quotes. And in his treatment of liberalism Achebe seems to be assailing what he should defend. The liberal tradition commends the maximization of human liberties; it has advocated the abolition of slavery, and upholds the jury system in courts of law and the democratic electoral system in politics. To sneer at liberalism is to sneer at democratic principles and to support racialism. That some British people condemned the exploitation of the blacks by Leopold's Belgians in the Congo was surely admirable; if they were not so prompt to condemn British misdeeds, that may have been because no British misdeeds at that time were equally appalling; and if they were at fault, that was because they needed more liberalism, not less. Albert Schweitzer's hospital was a big improvement on no hospital at all. Far from sidestepping the question of equality between white and black, it was internationally-publicized campaigns like that against Leopold's regime in the Congo which obviously did much to raise the question. If Europeans could descend to such barbarism as the amputation and collection of black hands by the basketful as a punitive measure for slow rubber-tapping, how could they regard themselves as morally superior to the natives? Inevitably that was one of the questions raised by Casement's report for the Government and by E. D. Morel's *Red Rubber*.¹⁰ And it may be remarked that Conrad's closest literary acquaintance, R. B. Cunninghame Graham, who had been a Liberal M.P. from 1886 to 1892, was forthright in his denunciation of cruelty inflicted by white on black, whether the white were Belgian or British. Here is the furious ending of his celebrated satiric denunciation of racialism, "'Bloody Niggers'", which had appeared less than two years before *Heart of Darkness*:

So many rapes and robberies, hangings and murders, blowings up in caves, pounding to jelly with our Maxim guns, such sympathy for Crete, such coyness to express our opinion on our doings in Matabeleland; our clergy all dumb dogs, our

⁹ Achebe's attack derives partly from Jonah Raskin's *The Mythology of Imperialism* (New York, 1971), though the latter gives high praise to much of the tale. Like Achebe, Raskin indicates hostility to democracy by his use of the terms 'liberal' and 'liberalism' as though they were pejorative. Ironically, it was Conrad who once remarked: 'Je n'ai pas le goût de la démocratie.'

¹⁰ In 1909 Morel, head of the Congo Reform Association, told Sir Arthur Conan Doyle that Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* was the 'most powerful thing ever written on the subject'. See Hunt Hawkins, 'Conrad's Critique of Imperialism in *Heart of Darkness*', *PMLA*, 94 (March 1979), 286–99 (p. 293).

politicians dazed about Armenia; 'land better liked than niggers', 'stern justice meted out' — can England be a vast and seething mushroom bed of base hypocrisy, and our own God, Jahve Sabbaoth, an anthropomorphous fool? (*Social-Democrat*, 1 (1897), 104–09 (p. 109))

Conrad's tale asks whether civilization may be merely a hypocritical sophistication of savagery and whether the organization entailed, with its technology, its commercial empires, and its vast conurbations, may actually sap the vitality of its people. The theme of 'hollow men' is important, and it is the whites of the Congo rather than the blacks who are in various ways depicted as hollow; and when Marlow returns to the 'sepulchral city' in Europe, he is contemptuous of the ignorant, sheeplike people in the streets.¹¹ If the reader thinks that a superstitious devotion to fetishes is a characteristic of savages, the tale shows whites who are insanely devoted to the fetish of ivory. If 'primitive' people pursue tribal warfare, what advance is displayed by the French warship which fires its shells into a continent? If 'primitive' people have their drums, what of our church bells? ('Perhaps on some quiet night the tremor of far-off drums . . . ; a sound weird, appealing, suggestive, and wild — and perhaps with as profound a meaning as the sound of bells in a Christian country' (*Heart of Darkness*, p. 20).) If one 'heart of darkness' is explicitly central Africa, another is London, centre of 'a mournful gloom', 'a brooding gloom'.

Thus the tale probes the very assumptions that Achebe says it endorses. And though *Heart of Darkness* is amply paradoxical, it is never as indecisive as two recent critics, Tzvetan Todorov and Terry Eagleton, have claimed. According to Todorov, the meaning of the text is that there is no meaning: it imparts the knowledge that nothing can be known. 'Que la connaissance soit impossible, que le coeur des ténèbres soit lui-même ténébreux, le texte tout entier nous le dit . . . Le sens dernier, la vérité ultime ne sont nulle part car il n'y a pas d'intérieur et le coeur est vide.' Such epistemological scepticism is indeed within Marlow's range of discussion, but Conrad's moral and political indignations are too substantial to be engorged by this vacuum. In *Criticism and Ideology*, Eagleton (who by subsuming democratic principles in 'impoverished bourgeois liberalism' shows his opposition to democracy) claims that 'the "message" of *Heart of Darkness* is that Western civilisation is at base as barbarous as African society — a viewpoint which disturbs imperialist assumptions to the precise degree that it reinforces them'.¹² In 'Janiform Novels' (*English*, 24 (1975), 40–49), I claimed that it was becoming increasingly fashionable for critics to reduce complex works to binary oppositions and to assert that each text is, accordingly, self-contradictory. This reductive procedure is very easy (for there is no complexity that cannot be simplified as a binary opposition if the critic so wills), very sterile (for it is

¹¹ Conrad may be recalling the ending of H. G. Wells's *The Island of Dr Moreau*, which he certainly knew.

¹² *Les Genres du discours* (Paris, 1978), pp. 180, 183; *Criticism and Ideology* (London, 1978), p. 135.

easy then to present the work as exhibiting a state of stalemate), and politically appropriative (for the Janiformity can be blamed on the contradictions of capitalist society). In fact literary works never do have the neat symmetry, the self-cancelling equipoise, that such an approach implies; that way post-structuralism lies.

To claim that *Heart of Darkness* reinforces imperialist assumptions 'to the precise degree' that it disturbs them is to ignore the direction taken by the major ironies as the tale unfolds. That recurrent pattern (assurance sought, apparently offered, then undermined) becomes more evident as we read on. A typical example is provided by Marlow's groping for some factor which redeems imperialism. He thinks first of 'efficiency', but recalls that the Romans were very efficient at 'robbery with violence' (and his subsequent narrative will show the heartless efficiency of the company's accountant); next he cites an 'idea': "'What redeems it is the idea only. An idea at the back of it; not a sentimental pretence but an idea; and an unselfish belief in the idea — something you can set up, and bow down before, and offer a sacrifice to . . .'" He broke off" (p. 7). And he breaks off there because, as we realize subsequently but cannot know initially, this attempt to define a redemptive factor has evoked in Marlow a memory of Kurtz, the one-time idealist who became for the natives literally what 'the idea' is supposed to be for good imperialists: because Kurtz was 'bowed down before'; Kurtz received sacrifice. And, of course, as if to contradict Achebe's imputation that the tale's liberalism is jingoistic, the subsequent stress on Kurtz's multi-national ancestry ('his mother was half-English, his father was half-French' and he 'had been educated partly in England' (p. 50)) erodes any comforting sense that though other nations may conduct predatory imperialism, the British can be relied on to do only 'real work'. That sense is strongly established early in the tale; it is important, but as a seductive premise to be increasingly questioned. Not only is there a steady accumulation of widely-ranging instances of the brutality and absurdity of imperialism, but also various devices, from the citation of dominoes as 'the bones' in the tale's fourth paragraph to the decision not to name the 'sepulchral city' as Brussels or the African region as the Belgian Congo, help to erode any final sense that British imperialism is immune to the main indictments that the narrative offers. As we have seen, when Marlow remarks, 'All Europe contributed to the making of Kurtz', he makes sure that we include England in that Europe. *Heart of Darkness* has many paradoxes, but in this respect its main ethical direction is clear and is not self-contradictory; certainly it is not the vacuous conundrum that Todorov described.

It is a cause for regret that Achebe was unwilling or unable to see this ethical direction; for really Conrad and Achebe are on the same side. Each man is most fully present in his own best literary work, and the Conrad of *Heart of Darkness* is the brother of the Achebe of *Things Fall Apart*. The two works are in important ways similar and complementary. Professor Molly

Mahood has suggested that some of Conrad's subsequent readers may have considered rewriting *Heart of Darkness* from the viewpoint of one of Kurtz's adherents: 'some elderly head of a Bakongo family, perhaps, for whom a religious rite, speakable or unspeakable, was not an orgy and a bloodbath, but a duty responsibly performed for the glory of the gods and the alleviation of the tribe's estate' (a subject of Achebe's second novel, *Arrow of God*); while *Things Fall Apart* 'opened to English readers one of the complex and ordered rural societies that lay behind Marlow's momentary glimpses "of rush walls, of peaked grass-roofs, of hands clapping, of feet stamping, of bodies swaying"'.¹³

Though there are distinctive differences between their approaches, both Conrad and Achebe employ a narrative technique which, basically realistic, has an impressionistic vividness and, partly through deliberate patterning of incident, a richly symbolic resonance. Both exploit irony and paradox on a large and small scale. Both are linguistically highly self-aware and adroit. Both value contrasting perspectives in space and in time: the large historical process and the viewpoint of the individual caught up in, and not fully comprehending, that process; the view of the native, intersected by the view of the white invader.

Conrad had conceived his Mr Kurtz as a cluster of paradoxes. He is no nonentity but a genius: an outstanding European who might have become a great musician or political leader; but in the jungle, isolated, his talents are corrupted into parodies of themselves (or reduced to essences of themselves): he is drawn by the drums and the chanting, and leads an adoring tribe on pillaging expeditions. Unlike the more crudely rapacious Europeans, he had ideals of guiding the blacks; but his report ends 'Exterminate all the brutes!'. He is both hollow and full: hollow, in the sense that he seems to lack moral backbone; full, in the sense that he owns and gratifies the appetites that other men lack. He is seen as both contemptible and awe-inspiring in his corruption. 'The horror!' is a cry which may be an indictment of his own corruption and therefore an endorsement of decent morality, or an indictment of the horrible nature of the universe and thus an endorsement of his kind of Satanic existentialism.

In *Things Fall Apart*, Achebe's Okonkwo is conceived as radically paradoxical, too: a brave warrior driven by fear: 'His whole life was dominated by fear, the fear of failure and of weakness.' He is no nonentity but a quester who might have become a revered leader of the tribe, but who, with the onset of the white men, is unable to adapt: he kills, finds himself isolated from his fellows, and commits suicide. Kurtz had written an uncomprehending report for the Society for the Suppression of Savage Customs; for Achebe's uncomprehending District Commissioner, Okonkwo's suicide will become merely a paragraph in his *The Pacification of the the Lower Niger*. Okonkwo is

¹³ *The Colonial Encounter* (London, 1977), p. 37.

both hollow and full: hollow, in the sense that he is always aware of inner fears, inner weaknesses; full, in the sense that he gratifies passions and indignations that others lack or suppress. He is seen as both admirable and pitiable: admirable in his endeavour to be a courageous leader of men; pitiable in his self-destructive failure to adapt. His death shows his inflexibility but also his stubborn bravery. A telling irony in his career is that he who had sought to suppress the 'feminine' (the gentle and sensitive) in himself and others is sent into exile from his beloved tribe because he commits a 'female' crime. ('Crime was of two kinds, male and female. Okonkwo had committed the female, because it was inadvertent. He could return to the clan after seven years.')¹⁴

Conrad was able to show some valuable features of European civilization (notably the complex and humane outlook represented by Marlow) while condemning its hubris, its rapacity, and its refusal to accept an equilibrium with the environment, and while noting its male dominance. Achebe was able to show the valuable features of tribal society (the solidarity and the continuity of social ritual which preserved the equilibrium of man with his environment) while noting its cruelties (the killing of twins and the murder of hostages like Ikemefuna) and its injustices (that concept of 'female' or involuntary crime, and the subjugation of the womenfolk). Conrad qualifies his indignation at the white incursion by describing, for example, the diligent engineer who helps to repair the steamer. Achebe qualifies his indignation at the white incursion by describing, for example, the considerate Mr Brown, the constructive missionary. Conrad shows the subversion of white norms by African energies; Achebe shows the subversion of black norms by European energies. Both writers protest against man's inhumanity to man, and their definitions of that inhumanity are strikingly congruent.

In his criticism of *Heart of Darkness*, Achebe's premise is that a literary work is good if it implies recommendations which he regards as humane, and bad (however great its incidental merits) if it implies recommendations which he regards as inhumane. I have so far attempted to argue that by his own criterion *Heart of Darkness* is good. But now a further stage of the discussion is needed, because that criterion is, of course, questionable in various ways. One difficulty is that raised in the nineteenth century by Max Nordau's *Degeneration*: namely, that by the criterion of patently humane recommendations, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* is superior to *Madame Bovary* (or *Gulliver's Travels* or *The Waste Land* or *The Castle*, for example). Dr Johnson remarked of Shakespeare: 'he seems to write without any moral purpose';¹⁵ but critics have been tenaciously reluctant to concede that works of high literary merit often appear morally nastier than works of literary inferiority.

¹⁴ *Things Fall Apart* (London, 1958), p. 111.

¹⁵ *The Yale Edition of the Works of Samuel Johnson*, Volumes VII and VIII, *Johnson on Shakespeare*, edited by Arthur Sherbo (New Haven and London, 1968), VII, 71.

Achebe makes it clear that he could praise *Heart of Darkness* only if he felt that its values tallied with his own, which include hostility to imperialism. An obvious paradox arises. A critic who in his travels through the world of letters seeks to commend those areas which he can annex as supports for his own values is practising ideological imperialism: his readings may constitute a support-system for himself as critical emperor.¹⁶ However, any teacher knows from experience that it is quite possible sincerely to commend literary works whose values, when the subject-matter is paraphrased, are not those of the teacher. A sceptic may sincerely be enthusiastic about Donne's religious verse; a socialist may sincerely enjoy Pope's 'Epistle to Burlington'; while an optimist may sincerely relish Swift or Kafka; and not on mere grounds of 'style'.

To account for this, I have suggested previously that the moral value of literary works may lie in their dialectical rather than their exemplary force: in the vigour of their challenges to moral presuppositions rather than in their commendation of any readily-paraphrasable and acceptable moral position.¹⁷ The truth is more of a muddle, however, than this suggests. We value some works for their challenges, some for their support, and many for their mixture of both; vitality of embodiment is what counts in the works of merit. If we find ourselves enthusiastic over works whose religious, political, moral, or philosophical positions are not ours, it will generally be found that the criterion is still truth to experience. My world is not as Kafkaesque as Kafka's, but intermittently I do encounter the Kafkaesque in life (in queues at labyrinthine offices, perhaps, or in the time-wasting rituals of National Service, or in the sense that to pursue 'ultimate' meanings may deprive life of 'local' meanings), and Kafka's vitality lies in that selective intensity of depiction which draws on dream, nightmare, fairy-tale, Bible, and fable. I am not as frequently nauseated as Gulliver, but the corporeal vilenesses that Swift frequently depicts I occasionally experience: there is both endorsement and challenge, for I have known that disgust but have not been inclined to invest it with the importance that Swift does. *Heart of Darkness* works on us in a variety of ways. That it may evoke humane attitudes to blacks may be deemed meritorious but is not necessarily a literary merit; what matters is the verve, originality, intelligence, and imaginativeness of the approach to experience generally. Part of the time in *Heart of Darkness*, Conrad (like Swift and Kafka in their works) is writing under satirist's licence: he exaggerates the absurdity and incommunication in the world, but what is exaggerated is closely observed and intelligently amplified, and such exaggerations offer truth-seeking challenges. *The Nigger of the 'Narcissus'*, *The Secret Agent*, and 'The Secret Sharer' show that Conrad could readily produce masterpieces whose apparent ethical outlook was distinctly more ruthless than that

¹⁶ 'A prime function of critical discourse should be to resist and reduce appropriative tendencies in our reading,' Alan Sinfield, 'Against Appropriation', *Essays in Criticism*, 31 (July 1981), 181–95 (p. 193).

¹⁷ 'Janiform Novels', p. 49.

customarily adopted by critics and commentators. As there are numerous great literary works, from Juvenal's *Satires* to *Waiting for Godot*, in which white people are treated harshly, we should not rule out the possibility of a masterpiece in which blacks are treated harshly. That Conrad should, in 1899, have treated the blacks with considerable humanity strikes me as admirable, but I suspect that the tale's high status does not (or should not) depend on that humanity; the belief that it does confuses fiction with other forms of discourse (for example, the sermon or the political tract); and this is not to imply that literature is 'above' morality or politics, but merely to indicate that literature is morally and politically more complex than are such forms. And the complexity includes the element of retreat from life as well as scrutiny of it. We may more easily (and inexpensively) respond benevolently to the suffering natives in Conrad's grove of death than we might to real natives encountered in an actual grove (and we gain the pleasure of the vivid evocation). The former experience is in some measure 'aestheticized'; but nevertheless an experience aestheticized may often be an experience generalized as a result, and therefore may be related by us to a wider variety of actual circumstances. This is known as well to Achebe, the lover of folk-lore, as to Conrad, who felt that he might have made Kurtz too symbolic.¹⁸

Achebe notes with indignation that Conrad (in the 'Author's Note' to *Victory*) speaks of an encounter with 'a buck nigger' in Haiti which gave him an impression of mindless violence. Achebe might as well have noted the reference in *The Nigger of the 'Narcissus'* (an obnoxious title? the first American edition was entitled *The Children of the Sea*) to 'a tormented and flattened face — a face pathetic and brutal: the tragic, the mysterious, the repulsive mask of a nigger's soul'. He might have noted, also, that Conrad's letters are sprinkled with casual anti-Semitic references. It is the same in the letters of his friend Graham. Both Conrad and Graham were influenced by the climate of prejudice of their times: times when racial and particularly anti-Semitic prejudice was common to most people of all classes. What is interesting is that the best work of both men seems to transcend such prejudice.

Graham's tale 'Mirahuano' (in the collection *Hope*, 1910) portrays a negro poet who is patronized by the whites; realizing that he is tolerated but never really befriended, he drowns himself. It is one of the more memorable of Graham's slight tales. In *The Nigger of the 'Narcissus'* what makes Jimmy dangerous is not that he is black but that he is ambiguous, pretending to be gravely ill when he is relatively fit and pretending to be fit when he is mortally ill.¹⁹ It is the predatory Donkin who uses 'black' as a term of abuse;

¹⁸ 'What I distinctly admit is the fault of having made Kurtz too symbolic or rather symbolic at all.' Conrad to Elsie Hueffer, 3 December 1902, cited in Jocelyn Baines, *Joseph Conrad: A Critical Biography* (London, 1960), p. 227.

¹⁹ The ambiguity of James Wait's surname is appropriately subversive. When he first calls it out, the chief mate hears it as an insubordinate command ('Wait!') to delay. Critics have been slow to notice that Conrad exploits the homophonous meaning ('weight') too. Wait is a weight, impediment, or burden to the ship: when she capsizes, the downward side is that in which he is trapped in his cabin; and when he is buried at sea, the ship rolls 'as if relieved of an unfair burden'.

the crew are willing enough to befriend Jimmy. There seems to be a general rule in Conrad's fiction that the more forceful the expression of racial prejudice, the more corrupt is the speaker: the bullying captain in *Lord Jim* refers to the Moslem passengers as 'dese cattle', and it is a sign of Kurtz's moral collapse that he refers to the blacks as 'brutes'. In *Nostromo*, Hirsch at first resembles the anti-Semite's stereotype of the carpet-bagging, cowardly Jew; but in his final agony, tortured on the *strappado* by Sotillo, he has his moment of heroism, spitting defiantly in his captor's face; and his lot is adroitly linked to Decoud's, for Hirsch was suspended at a rope's end, while the bold gentile Decoud experiences the silence of the gulf as 'a tense, thin cord to which he hung suspended by both hands'. The reiterated detail undermines contrast and may encourage us to see a common humanity.

Thus it appears that the originality of mind that makes an admirable literary work is often linked to a subversive attitude to cultural prejudices and presuppositions. However, we should beware of sentimentalizing such subversiveness by assuming that it is necessarily 'liberal' or 'progressive'. As the available mishmash of cultural prejudices and presuppositions includes both the liberal and the illiberal, so the work may as readily subvert the former by its illiberality of outlook as the latter by its liberality. Here we are thinking of the relatively paraphrasable aspects of the work. Whatever its doctrinal direction, however, the work of merit still celebrates humanity obliquely through its apparently non-doctrinal characteristics of intelligence and imaginativeness of presentation of experience. And this is what the history of literary criticism itself should teach us. One admirable critic, Samuel Johnson, was a Tory Anglican; another, F. R. Leavis, was a liberal agnostic; while another, Jean-Paul Sartre, was an atheistic Marxist. This shows that the merit of a critic depends not on his doctrinal assumptions (though they may well influence all that he writes) but on the intelligence of his responsiveness to the works he discusses. Principles, prejudices, and procedures can readily be imparted by instruction; acumen cannot.